The sexual revolution is linked in the popular imagination to the invention of oral contraception, or “the pill.” The birth control pill was the first form of contraceptive that could be used separately from the act of sex, making it unobtrusive and liberating. It was also the first form of contraception that lay completely within the control of women. A woman could use the pill without the cooperation, or even the knowledge, of her sexual partner. From the start, therefore, the pill created anxiety, particularly among conservatives, who argued that if women (and men) were freed from the consequences of sex, namely pregnancy, they would engage in it more often, including outside of the bonds of marriage. Because the pill appeared on the market in 1960, around the period associated with the beginning of the sexual revolution, the pill was often understood as a principal cause of the loosening of societal restrictions and attitudes about sexual activity. A causal relationship between the introduction of the birth control pill and the sexual revolution of the 1960s is not, however, supported by scholarship.

The Sexual Revolution

While the term sexual revolution has existed since at least 1910, it came into popular use during the 1960s to identify what were perceived as new and dangerous changes in sexual attitudes that were becoming mainstream. In the early 1960s, these changes were associated with developments such as the popularity of Playboy magazine (founded in 1953 by Hugh Hefner) and the legalization of oral contraception (in 1960). In just over a decade, the term encompassed the 1967 Summer of Love; a new cultural openness about sexual pleasure exemplified by the 1972 publication of The Joy of Sex, which spent much of the next two years on the New York Times bestseller list; people marrying later; an increased acceptance of premarital sex; and cultural movements such as free love, gay liberation, and, to a certain extent, women's liberation. The term sexual revolution linked all of these factors (and more) together as a cohesive social shift, one that received sweeping cultural attention.

The idea of a sexual revolution captured the popular imagination, but historians of sexuality tend to dispute the idea that this revolution was truly a phenomenon of the 1960s. In the groundbreaking book Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America, John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman point out that many of the behaviors associated with the so-called sexual revolution had long existed in American life. More recently, Beth Bailey's Sex in the Heartland points out that the term sexual revolution linked many social trends that, in fact, had little to do with each other. She states that the term revolution played up both the danger and the coherence of these changes. For instance, she observes that the concept of free love shares little in common with the relationships of long-term monogamous couples cohabitating outside of marriage.

Bailey also suggests that linking minor events, such as a fashion for long hair on men and long-term trends, such as an increased acceptance of and openness about premarital sex, increased the importance of those factors that might otherwise have been regarded as insignificant. It is not that these events did not happen, or that the middle of the 20th century did not see a shift in how Americans understood and lived their sexual lives. It is simply that the changes were often the result of larger and longer trends (greater equality and independence for women), or were isolated incidents that had limited impact on the lives of most Americans (the Summer of Love). Emphasizing those longer
trends underscores the extent to which the changes in sexual mores impacted all Americans, not simply those on the radical edges of society.

While scholars dispute whether a period of increased relaxation of sexual standards and changing sexual mores is best described as a truly revolutionary social movement, commentators saw the sexual revolution as real and dangerous. While conservative commentators linked the sexual revolution to a number of social factors, they focused their attention in part on the new mode of contraception. This form of contraception was the first to completely separate the act of sexual intercourse from the prevention of pregnancy. As a result of “the pill,” there was no need to interrupt sexual activity in order to employ birth control, as was the case with the most popular previous methods of contraception. It was also the first form of contraception that was completely left up to women to use as they saw fit.

A Brief History of the Pill

The Food and Drug Administration approved oral contraception, or the birth control pill, in 1960. This contraceptive was nearly 100 percent effective when correctly used. Women immediately began to avail themselves of the advantages it offered. By 1964, the pill was the most widely used method of birth control in the United States, with 6.5 million married women taking it.

While the pill promised (and provided) a transformative means of liberation for women, most of the public debate around oral contraception did not focus on what it would mean for women. Advocates of oral contraception spoke less about its impact on the American woman, and more about its potential for limiting the global population explosion. Its advocates, including doctors who were working to make it available to women, did not necessarily believe in premarital sex, and were quick to say so. They argued that women who were going to have sex outside of marriage would do so, reliable contraception or not.

The pill promised to decrease out-of-wedlock births without increasing the amount of sex engaged in outside of marriage. Rather, they hoped that the pill would bolster the American family. Because it would free married women from the constant threat of pregnancy, it would allow couples to control their household economies, both by limiting the number of children they had and by allowing women to take advantage of economic opportunities. Limiting family size would allow more families to enter the middle class, with all of the possibilities for consumption and education that would provide. The planned family was thus presented as the happy family. In addition, couples could have planned families without forgoing the sexual pleasures inherent in companionate marriage. In other words, sex was no longer linked to reproduction, so couples could have both an active sex life and the size of family they wanted. If the pill promised liberation, its early prescribers and advocates saw it as providing that liberation within the bonds of marriage.

Indeed, oral contraception made an immense difference within marriage. As an easy and effective method of family planning, married women were able to pursue educational and professional opportunities that would previously have been precluded by childbearing and child-rearing. Not only did such changes increase the upward mobility of American families, but they also allowed women to enter the work force and professions without sacrificing marriage and family. This gave them more economic autonomy within families. The pill empowered women to control their fertility in situations where their husbands or other sexual partners were unwilling take responsibility for birth control. The impact of birth control pills on marriage was reflected in popular culture, particularly in Loretta Lynn's 1975 controversial hit “The Pill,” a song that told of the disappointment that a woman met when her marriage
tied her (but not her husband) to endless childrearing. She dreams of her sexual liberation, reflecting that “feeling good comes easy now I've got the pill.” Feeling good does not, however, liberate her from her marriage. Rather, it liberates her within her marriage as the closing couplet, “Daddy don't you worry none, cause mama's got the pill” promises that it is sex with her husband that she desires.

Nevertheless, conservative commentators worried that severing sex from reproduction (and putting that control in women's hands) would lead to increased promiscuity. In 1966, the magazine *U.S. News and World Report* suggested that the pill would bring about not just promiscuity, but also “sexual anarchy.” The article drew examples of this anarchy from the use of contraception by Roman Catholic couples, its presence on college campuses, and the suggestion that cities were exploring the distribution of the pill to its welfare recipients. Without the fear of pregnancy, the magazine expressed the concern that “mating” would become “causal and random, as among animals.” In a 1968 article in *Reader's Digest*, Pearl S. Buck suggested that the impact of the pill could easily be as great and devastating as the nuclear bomb. This fear, linking a reliable method of birth control to sexual immorality, reflected a belief that if sex lacked consequences, it would no longer be able to be controlled by institutions such as marriage. Specifically, if women could control their fertility and did not need to fear pregnancy, they would become sexually free and without restraint. Conversely, some worried that women would trick men into believing that they were on the pill, and trap them into marriage by becoming pregnant.

In fact, although the pill became immediately popular, it was not necessarily immediately and widely available. Many physicians would not prescribe oral contraception to unmarried women. As a result, unmarried women would access the pill by borrowing engagement rings and telling their doctors that they were “preparing for their marriages.” In many states, it was illegal to prescribe contraception to unmarried women, and in Massachusetts and Connecticut, it was illegal for all women. In 1965, the Supreme Court struck down birth control bans for married individuals in the case *Griswold v. Connecticut*. In 1972, the Supreme Court decision in *Eisenstaedt v. Baird* gave unmarried people the right to contraception. Throughout the 1960s, however, the pill was not necessarily legally available to unmarried women. In places where it was illegal, some unmarried women gained access to the pill, but in its early years, most users of the pill were married.

Indeed, sexual revolution aside, many single women in the 1960s did not express revolutionary attitudes toward sex. While the marriage age was rising and sex outside of marriage was becoming incrementally more common, even young people did not necessarily approve of sex outside of marriage or explicitly premarital relationships. According to historian Elaine Tyler May, a 1964 poll of 1,900 female students at the University of Kansas revealed that 91 percent of the women believed that it was wrong to have sex with a man to whom one was not engaged. May points out that it is likely that more than 9 percent of the college women were sexually active, and that many probably felt guilty about their behavior. Even as that guilt eased, not everyone agreed that the pill caused the increasing prevalence of premarital sex. Rather, in 1968, *Science News* reported that an increase in sex-out-of-wedlock was not from the pill, pointing out that reliable contraception had been available long before the pill, and argued that contraception was not a major factor in young people's decisions about sex.

Similarly, Ira Reiss, a sociologist of sexual behavior, argued that cultural and religious changes caused more of an increase in premarital sex than the pill, and also pointed out that the increase in premarital sex was much smaller than popularly imagined. According to Reiss, in 1968, 60 percent of female college graduates had never had sex, only a slight decrease from before 1960. In addition, a number of
studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s suggested that the majority of sexually active teenagers did not have access to birth control, and used it erratically, if at all.

In *America and the Pill*, Elaine Tyler May states that while the pill and the sexual revolution were related, the pill did not cause the sexual revolution. Certainly, the availability of a reliable form of birth control made it more possible for women to engage in sex outside of marriage. Women, however, were slow to change their behavior, and it is likely that the pill only enabled behavioral changes that other social and cultural shifts had already begun to make acceptable.

**See Also:** Birth Control Pills; Contraception: IUDs; Family Planning; Feminism; Prenatal Care and Pregnancy

**Further Readings**


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